

**Interim Report to the Faculty Senate
Ad Hoc Retention Committee
February 22, 2019**

Background

Enrollment at University of Arkansas at Little Rock has fallen from a peak of 13,176 students in 2010 to 10,515 students in 2018, a decline of twenty percent. While it does not appear that a change in student retention is a contributing factor to this (driven more by first time enrollment), it makes sense in this climate to investigate how the University can improve student retention.

Compared to our peer institutions, UA Little Rock ranks in the bottom half in full-time student retention, and near the bottom in part-time student retention.

In October, the Faculty Senate appointed an ad hoc committee on student retention at UA Little Rock. Our members include both faculty and staff in academic affairs, and we have had active participation and support from Daryl Rice on behalf of academic advising and from Richard Harper in Student Affairs, Cody Decker and Blane Stroud in OIR, among many others.

Our charge has been to analyze data on student retention at UA Little Rock, review current practices on our campus in both academic and student affairs that pertain to retention and make recommendations on legislation to Faculty Senate to improve student retention.

We are aiming to provide a final report in April, but given urgency the committee wants to offer some preliminary recommendations to the Senate today so it can begin to consider action this academic year.

These recommendations are in part motivated by a consideration of which students are most vulnerable to leaving UA Little Rock and why.

Which Students Are Most Vulnerable to Attrition?

OIR provided descriptive data on retention and attrition since 2013 across a number of relevant categories, including:

- Student cohort
- Student level
- Age
- Gender
- Race and ethnicity
- Unmet financial need
- Academic performance

These descriptive data suggest that some students are more vulnerable to attrition than others:

1) Freshmen (and to a lesser extent, sophomores)

--- 63% of the fall 2014 freshman cohort had left UA Little Rock without a degree four years later (Fall 2018).

Most of that loss (two thirds) happened in the first year (40% of the 2014 fall freshman cohort was gone by fall 2015).

Another 14% were gone by Fall 2016 (end of sophomore year)

2) Online students: One-year attrition rate is 35%, compared to 25% for face to face students

3) Black and American Indian students: One-year attrition rate is 32%, compared to 25% for white and Hispanic students

5) Students with unmet financial need greater than \$10,000 (one-year attrition is 36% for those with \$10,000 or more, compared to 19% for this under \$5000 in unmet need).

6) Part-time undergraduate students (37% for part-time, compared to about 22% for full time undergraduate and graduate students)

7) Students with poor academic performance (For students with GPA < 2.0, one-year attrition is 80%, compared to 20% for those with GPA > 2.0)

General picture suggests that our problems in retention are primarily with freshmen, online, and part-time students. May be more vulnerable to poor academic performance and thus withdrawal from UA Little Rock.

Conversely, some students seem less vulnerable to attrition than others:

1) Graduate students: One-year attrition is about 20%, relatively low

1) Seniors (perhaps not surprisingly: less resilient students will drop out earlier, and as graduation is closer the costs for finishing the degree are smaller). Attrition rates are nearly the same as for graduate students.

2) Students in a major within an identified college --- One-year attrition rates did not vary much for students who were in one of the 5 programmatic colleges (21% for CALS, 25% for business and CSSC). These students are generally not freshmen.

3) International students

- 4) Asian students (one-year attrition rate of 14%, compared to 25% for white students)
- 5) First time in college students: First-year attrition is 28%, compared to 40% for freshmen overall
- 6) Students with unmet financial need under \$5000
- 7) Full-time students
- 8) Students with GPA > 2.0

We must be careful about drawing causal inference from these observations since factors such as student level, age, race, financial need, academic performance, online-status, and part-time vs. full-time status are likely to be correlated with each other. We recommend additional analysis with student-level data on attrition to help isolate the direct effects of these student variables on attrition and persistence.

But in general, this suggests that we might improve retention by:

- 1) Supporting more vulnerable students to help improve resilience to barriers to success
- 2) Recruiting and admitting more students who are less vulnerable to attrition to begin with (full-time, face-to-face, first-time-in-college, international students).

Why Do Students Leave UA Little Rock?

The retention committee is also in the process of examining why students leave UA Little Rock.

SRC has conducted two recent surveys of non-returning students, one in Fall 2013 and one in Fall 2018.

On both surveys, students were asked an open-ended question about the single most important reason why they did not re-enroll.

In both cases, no single category of reasons dominate. The dispersion of responses across categories is high. In general, the most commonly cited reasons related to costs or funding (23%) and/or to financial aid (10%); personal (16%) or health-related reasons (11%); or employment-related reasons (15%). Far fewer students cited complaints related quality of education or services at UA Little Rock: 6% indicated they transferred because they were not happy at UALR, and another 4% indicated that “problems with university processes” were a factor.

These findings could suggest that we might make more headway in addressing retention by addressing resilience: the capacity for students to persevere through a personal financial, health, or other circumstance to complete a program. They may also indicate that we focus on recruiting students who are less vulnerable to such issues.

Preliminary Recommendations

Rather than re-invent the wheel, the Retention Committee has reviewed a number of previous reports that address student retention and student success at UA Little Rock to identify recommendations that have not been fully implemented yet. These reports include:

- 1) A 2007 Student Retention Summit led by Chancellor Anderson
- 2) A 2010 report by an ad hoc retention committee chaired by Sandra Robertson and titled “Proposed Organizational Structure to Facilitate Student Success” (with an accompanying 2012 update by Daryl Rice).
- 3) “Distinguishing UALR”: Recommendations generated to promote student success at the 2016 Provost Unit Head’s Retreat
- 4) The “Opportunity Analysis” generated last year by Rob Baird with Ruffalo-Noel-Levitz.

- 1) Develop a standing university-level committee on student success and retention

--- Multiple units, both academic and in student affairs, play important roles in student retention and success. But there is a notable absence at UA Little Rock of coordination across units on matters of student success and retention, indicating a high degree of “siloing” when it comes to coordinating strategies and assessing outcomes.

An important initial objective for this committee should be to develop a strategic plan to improve student retention and success at UA Little Rock. The retention committee’s research into our peer institutions finds evidence that nearly all of our peers who outperform UA Little Rock on retention have an identified retention plan. One model for such a committee and its process is the “Collective Impact” approach used to coordinate the efforts of multiple stakeholders towards a common well-defined and measurable objective.

- 2) Clarify responsibility for student retention at UA Little Rock.

While the buck stops with the Chancellor, the retention committee was unable to identify an administrator or staff person whose chief responsibility is student retention and success at the level of the university. In short, no one person is accountable for UA Little Rock’s degree of retention and success. The committee believes that a person serving in this role can help to coordinate and support the work of a standing retention committee, as well as acting as a voice for this aspect of governance in university administration.

3) Consider a requirement that core courses participate in Early Academic Alert reporting

--- Our research into peer institutions has found that universities where early academic alert systems are implemented tend to be more successful than UA Little Rock in student retention.

--- Implementation of this system at UA Little Rock is still in its pilot phase and has been voluntary.

--- Once we move beyond pilot and have a functioning system, we may wish to consider making faculty participation with the system a condition for inclusion of a course as part of the University's general education core.

--- Rationale is that it is likely to be in these courses that students are most vulnerable to problems that result in university attrition. Large courses, less support, higher DFW rates.

4) Consider a requirement that faculty record mid-term grades in Boss for 1000-2000 level courses.

--- Provides an additional opportunity for faculty or academic advisor intervention.

--- Implementation might be tailored to Core courses and/or to online 1000-2000 level courses, or high-enrollment courses.